

Mr. Edwards' Unraveled Life

Chapter 1021

Cynthia smirked, pointing a finger at Jimena before stepping out. "This village sticks together. Try to run, and the neighbors will snitch. We've treated you well—don't make us toss you in a pigsty."

Jimena had only seen things like this on TV. Now it was her reality. She forced a smile, slipping into the role of the obedient daughter-in-law. Fighting back would only get her hurt.

"I won't run," she said, ruffling Aisha's hair while clenching her fists behind her back. "Aisha saved me. I owe you all."

Cynthia snorted, unimpressed. "Don't play smart. We're not stupid." She grabbed Aisha's hand. "Let's go check out this doctor. Maybe he can fix your brother's leg. Then it's double the celebration—a working leg and a new wife."

Aisha's eyes sparkled. "Yeah! People always mock him for his limp. If it's fixed, they'll finally shut up. And with a fairy for a wife? They'll be so jealous!"

Cynthia gave Jimena a once-over, her tone sharpening. "You're part of the Cookes now. No lounging around like royalty. We've got work to do, so dinner better be ready when we get back. Got it?"

Jimena bit her lip. "I'll have it ready."

The door shut behind them. Jimena let out a breath, her shoulders sinking. She peeked outside. As expected, the neighbors were watching—an old woman washing clothes, a man gutting fish, another shouting at his wife. Their stares didn't waver.

No way out. Cynthia hadn't been bluffing.

Then she remembered the woman next door—the one locked in a pigsty.

She grabbed a coat and crossed over to Mailloux's house.

Mailloux was eating a bowl of rice when she walked in. His eyes bulged, raking over her shamelessly. Jimena pushed down her revulsion and forced a polite smile. "You must be Brother Mailloux."

He grinned. "That's me! Word's gotten around, huh?"

Jimena nodded. "Aunt Cynthia says you're capable. A real man. Shame your wife doesn't see it."

Mailloux lit up, slapping his thigh. "Right? That woman doesn't know how good she's got it. Guys like me don't grow on trees!"

Jimena sipped the water he offered, barely swallowing it. "Where is she, by the way?"

"Locked in the pigsty. Disrespectful little thing."

Her stomach turned, but she didn't flinch. "I'm new here. Cynthia's got me cooking, but I'm useless. Think your wife could help teach me?"

Mailloux perked up. "The Cookes are making a fairy like you cook? What a joke. I ought to give 'em a piece of my mind."

He softened, almost pitying. "Fine. I'll get her. Gotta wash her up first—she's a mess."

As he walked off, Jimena's pulse quickened. Maybe—just maybe—this was the start of something.

Chapter 1022

Just thinking about the woman locked in a pigsty made Jimena's chest ache. How many others were trapped in this nightmare? She didn't want to imagine.

She forced herself to nibble on the stale biscuits, sipping hot water to stay calm.

Mailloux returned, pushing a frail woman ahead of him. Her dress was dirty and hung off her thin frame, her hair matted and face hollow. She didn't look up.

"Go on," Mailloux barked. "Teach her to cook. Act up, and you don't eat."

The woman trembled as Jimena stood, offering her a steady hand. "Sister-in-law, I need help. I'm new and clueless in the kitchen."

Tears hit the floor. Her voice was flat. "Okay."

Mailloux grunted, giving a warning glare before walking off. "Don't get cute. Or you'll regret it."

Once outside, the woman yanked her arm away, eyes fierce. "You with them?"

"No," Jimena said quickly. "I swear I'm not."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're too pretty. Too clean. They treat you like you're gold. You're one of them."

"I'm not," Jimena insisted. "They tricked me too."

The woman's bloodshot eyes blazed. "Liar. They sent you to test me."

"No! I swear on my life. I want to help you—get you out of here."

"Out?" she scoffed, bitter. "You think you can save me?"

"Shh, keep it down." Jimena pulled her inside the Cooke house and shut the door behind them. She flicked on the light, trying to meet the woman's guarded gaze. "I'm not lying. Is there a way out of these mountains? A path, something?"

The woman's expression collapsed into hopelessness. "You're dreaming. This village is a trap. Daytime, they watch us. Nighttime, they lock us in. There's no way out."

"We'll find one," Jimena said. "We'll play along. Gain their trust. Then we run."

The woman's lip curled. "Someone tried once. Made it to town. They dragged her back."

"Then we won't make her mistakes," Jimena replied firmly. "We'll stock food, prepare. Stay low until it's time."

A long silence. Then: "You want to cook?" the woman asked. "Let's get to it."

Jimena's heart lifted. "You'll help me escape?"

The woman nodded. "I'll play their game for now."

In the kitchen, the woman—Cataleya—guided Jimena's hands as she sliced sweet potatoes. Her movements were careful, deliberate, her voice a whisper.

"What's your name?" Jimena asked.

"Cataleya."

Together they made two vegetarian dishes—simple but filling. When it was time for Cataleya to leave, Jimena caught her arm.

"I'll find ways to see you. Just keep playing along."

Cataleya nodded. "I get it. I'll do what they say."

Jimena watched her go, her heart heavy but focused. This was more than just about her now.

A knock startled her. Paxton stepped in, carrying a basket. His eyes lit up when he saw the food. "Not bad. Mom said you're too delicate for this stuff, but look at you."

Jimena forced a smile. "Cataleya taught me. I'd be lost without her."

Paxton frowned. "Her? She's a rebel. She really helped?"

Jimena nodded, lowering her voice. "Yeah. I talked to her. Told her we women have to accept our fate. Marry a chicken, follow the chicken. Marry a dog, follow the dog. If we're stuck here, might as well carry our weight."

Paxton's eyes lit up, pride warming his face. "You get it. Good girl."

Chapter 1023

Jimena tilted her head, giving Paxton a sweet, obedient smile. His face lit up, practically glowing with pride.

As he unpacked his basket, he chuckled. "You've got good taste. A guy like me, bum leg and all, landing a gorgeous, well-behaved wife? Talk about hitting the jackpot." He patted his shoulder, grinning. "Where's Mom and Aisha?"

Jimena pointed outside. "There's a doctor in the village doing free checkups. Everyone's lining up. Your mom went to see if he can help with your leg. Word is, he's the real deal."

Paxton's eyes widened. "Seriously? If he can fix this leg, my whole life changes!"

"You should go check it out," Jimena said, keeping her tone breezy.

Paxton nodded, then turned abruptly, his voice sharp. "You stay put. If I come back and you're gone, I'll break your legs. Got it?"

Jimena's smile never faltered, though bile rose in her throat. "Don't worry. I'm not going anywhere. I'm not like those other women."

Satisfied, Paxton left.

At the village gate, a long line wound through the crowd. Paxton spotted Cynthia and Aisha and jogged over, grumbling, "This line's insane."

Aisha tugged his sleeve. "Relax, bro. This doctor's from the city—handsome and super skilled. He might actually fix your leg!"

Paxton's grin returned. "A new leg and a new bride? This year's my lucky break."

Aisha giggled. "God's totally got your back."

Hours passed before they reached the front. The doctor wore a crisp white coat and glasses, his calm smile making even the crowd relax. Aisha stared, starstruck.

“Who’s next?” Cody asked, glancing up.

Cynthia eagerly shoved Paxton forward. “Him, doctor! His leg’s been bad since a fall years ago. But yesterday, we got a beautiful daughter-in-law—and now you’re here! What luck, right?”

At the words “daughter-in-law,” Cody’s smile faltered. He’d read the reports—trafficked women, remote villages, false marriages.

“A beautiful daughter-in-law?” he asked lightly. “Where’s she from?”

“I found her in the mountains,” Aisha said brightly. “She was lost, so I brought her home. My brother can’t find a wife with that leg, so I told her to marry him to repay us. She said yes!”

Cody’s stomach turned. *Moral blackmail. Just like the cases in the news.*

“She’s soft,” Cynthia added. “Can’t work yet, but we’ll toughen her up.”

Cody examined Paxton’s leg—bad break, old injury. *This needs surgery, not hope.*

“Nothing I can’t fix,” he said with a smile. “I’ve seen worse.”

Cynthia’s eyes filled with tears. “After all these years?”

“I’ve got more patients to see, but I’ll swing by your place tonight. Where do you live?”

She pointed to a plain brick house in the distance. “That one. Please come.”

“I’ll be there,” Cody promised.

Beaming, they headed home.

Back at the house, Jimena was sketching escape plans when the family stormed in, all grins. Her gut twisted, but she smiled. “You’re back! Dinner’s ready.”

Cynthia inspected the food and nodded. “Not bad for your first try.” She patted Jimena’s shoulder. “Heard you got through to Mailloux’s woman. She’s behaving now—no more pigsty for her.”

Jimena forced a smile. “Glad to hear it. I was thinking of checking on her after dinner, just to keep her calm.”

“No way,” Cynthia snapped. “Stay away from Mailloux. He’s a creep. You go there, and you’re cheating on my son.”

Chapter 1024

Jimena nodded, voice soft. “Got it. I’ll stay away. Just curious.”

Cynthia relaxed, pleased with herself. She sent Jimena off to wash rice. By the time she finished, night had fallen. But Jimena’s thoughts stayed fixed on Cataleya, still trapped, still waiting.

From the cellar, Jimena hauled up a few bottles of rice wine.

“What are you doing?” Cynthia scolded. “Put that back! That’s for holidays.”

“But... isn’t this a celebration?” Jimena said, voice uncertain. “If the doctor can fix Paxton’s leg, that’s huge.”

Cynthia hesitated. Paxton jumped in. “Come on, Mom. The wine’s collecting dust. Let’s celebrate!”

“Fine,” Cynthia said at last, popping open a bottle.

The wine was cheap but strong enough. Between Paxton’s “miracle” and their new daughter-in-law, the Cookes drank too much, too fast. Paxton, a lightweight, slumped over the table, hiccuping.

“One more bowl!” he slurred.

Jimena held up a finger. “Guess what this is?” But he was out cold before he could answer.

She dragged him into the bedroom, trying to keep the scene quiet. On the way, she “accidentally” knocked over a few wine bowls—*crash*. Her heart pounded. But he didn’t stir.

Then she saw the stove, flames dancing gently. Her mind raced. A fire would draw the village. They’d all come running.

She poured wine near the hearth and tossed in hay and firewood. The flames shot up, roaring fast.

Jimena clamped a hand over her mouth and bolted outside.

“Fire! Help! People are inside!”

Smoke billowed. Grain, livestock, homes—the village had a lot to lose. Men raced to help.

"Where'd this come from?" someone yelled. "Get water! Mailloux—keep your place from catching!"

Mailloux ran out in his underwear. Jimena turned her face, revolted. But no one paid her much mind—they saw her as obedient, no threat.

The village chief pulled her aside, demanding answers. She stammered something about spilled wine and a stray ember. He bought it.

In the chaos, she slipped away—straight to Mailloux's house.

Cataleya jumped at the noise but calmed when she saw Jimena. "That fire—was it you?" she whispered, amazed. "You've got guts."

"No time," Jimena said, helping her up. "Where are the other women? Get them. We're escaping tonight."

Cataleya froze. "But how? There's no road, no car—"

"The doctor. He's my friend. If he helps, we're out."

Cataleya stared, then slowly nodded. "Alright. I'm in."

They moved fast. Some women were naked, others bruised, locked in pigsties. All broken. But every single one was ready to run.

At the clinic, Cody sat under a dim lamp, rubbing his temples. The day had been long. The village had treated him well—too well.

Then—**bang bang bang**—a frantic knock.

He stood, annoyed. "Who's pounding on my door?"

"Doctor Cody, help!" a voice cried.

His heart dropped.

He yanked the door open—and there she was.

"Jimena?"

Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms, trembling. "I've been looking for you forever."

Jimena's eyes brimmed with tears.

She didn't need fate or logic.

She had him.

And she had hope.

Chapter 1025

Cody ushered the women inside, his expression darkening as Jimena laid out the truth. Every word made his jaw tighten.

"I want to get them out," she said urgently. "They were forced here. Their families are waiting beyond these mountains. They're not livestock. They don't belong here—being used to breed for this place."

Silence fell over the group. Some of the women had children here. Leaving meant abandoning them. Staying meant enduring more abuse. The choice was impossible.

Jimena glanced at Cody, afraid he might hesitate. "We need to move fast. The villagers will realize they're gone any minute now."

"I'm in," Cody said without pause. "Take my car."

Relief washed over her. The women stirred with hope. The car would be tight, but it could work.

Jimena quickly organized them—Cataleya helping—and turned back to Cody. "You've been quiet. You're not coming?"

He shook his head. "Didn't you notice? They're terrified of men. Half of them can't even meet my eyes."

"But you can't stay," Jimena insisted. "If they find out you helped, they'll hurt you."

"I'm the village doctor. They still need me—for now, they won't touch me." He held up his phone. "Signal's spotty, but it's something. I'll be okay."

Jimena didn't buy it, but there was no time to argue. The fire at Paxton's house was out. Cynthia and Paxton had sobered up and realized Jimena was missing.

"That snake set the fire!" Cynthia screeched. "She nearly killed us—she's running, and I bet she took Mailloux's wife too!"

The village exploded. If it were just Paxton's wife, they might've laughed. But if their own wives were missing? That was war.

Men rushed home, shouting. "They're gone! All of them!"

Torches were lit. They fanned out, weapons in hand, heading toward the sedimentation pond.
“They’ve gotta be hiding there,” one man growled.

At the village entrance, Jimena and the women loaded food and piled into Cody’s car. The air was thick with adrenaline.

Distant shouting cracked through the night. Jimena froze. “They’re coming.”

Cody shoved the car keys into her hands. “Drive. Now.”

“I can’t leave you.”

“You have to. They need you,” he said firmly.

She climbed in, her eyes locked on his as she drove off. His tall, steady figure shrank in the rearview mirror. Tears blurred her vision, but she didn’t slow down.

At the town’s police station, Jimena burst through the doors with four women trailing her—bruised, starved, haunted.

The officers jumped to their feet.

“There’s still someone back there!” she cried. “You have to go—he’s the one who helped us escape!”

She was running on fumes—no food, barely any water, no sleep. Her body trembled as she stood her ground.

“Someone’s still in that village?” an officer repeated.

“Cody. A doctor. He was doing free checkups. They probably took his phone already.”

The station jumped into motion, a team forming immediately. Jimena begged to go with them.

“I need to see he’s safe,” she said, her voice cracking.

The officers hesitated, then relented.

Back in the village, Cody stood at the edge of the pond as the mob surrounded him—angry, armed, and growing bolder.

They'd taken his phone. He hadn't eaten. Still, he stood tall.

"You helped them escape, didn't you?" one man snarled. "Tell us where they went!"

Cody stayed silent.

Another man stepped forward with a rope. "You don't talk, you don't eat. You don't talk, we make you scream."

Just as the rope tightened in the man's hands, police sirens split the night. Red and blue lights flooded the village.

Officers stormed in, guns drawn.

"Drop everything! On the ground!"

Cynthia, Paxton, the village chief—all were cuffed. They knelt in the dirt, defeated.

Jimena jumped from the patrol car, sprinting toward Cody.

"Are you okay?" she gasped.

He looked pale, lips dry from hunger, but he managed a weak grin. "I'm fine. You, though—you look like a panda."

She laughed through her tears. Relief hit her like a wave.

She handed him biscuits from her coat. As he ate, color returned to his face.

Finally, the adrenaline gave out. Jimena collapsed in his arms, asleep before she could speak another word.

Chapter 1026

Cody caught her before she hit the ground, panic flashing in his eyes.

He carried her straight to the hospital. Tests confirmed it—just severe exhaustion and low blood sugar. She needed rest, fluids, and food.

Cody never left her bedside. Guilt churned in his chest.

"How could you let yourself get this bad?" he whispered, brushing her hair from her forehead. "You carried everyone to safety... and forgot yourself."

The next morning, the door burst open.

“Dr. Cody!”

Miranda froze when she saw him slouched in a chair beside Jimena’s bed, eyes red from sleeplessness.

He looked up, expression unreadable. “What are you doing here?”

She swallowed hard. “I heard you were in trouble. I... I came to make sure you were okay.”

Her eyes flicked to Jimena. “Who is she?”

Jimena stirred faintly but didn’t open her eyes. She’d woken the moment Miranda entered, but something in the air made her stay still.

“She’s fine now,” Cody said. “Just needs rest.”

Miranda’s voice sharpened. “If she’s fine, why are you still here? You don’t stay with other patients.”

“She’s different.”

“How?” Miranda pressed, the same question buzzing in Jimena’s ears.

Cody looked at Jimena, his gaze soft. “She just is.”

Miranda stepped closer, her voice tense. “You said you’d wait for me. That we’d be together. Was that all a lie?”

He looked her in the eye. “It wasn’t a lie. But things change. She’s my priority now.”

Jimena’s heart pounded. She nearly blew her cover right then.

Miranda’s face twisted. “She was sold off—married to someone else! If we hadn’t found her, she’d be having that guy’s kid by now!”

Jimena’s chest burned. She wanted to sit up and scream, but forced her fingers to stay still.

Cody’s voice cut through like steel. “I care about her. That’s all that matters.”

Miranda paled. “You’re serious.”

“I am.” He turned away. “I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

Miranda stormed out.

As the door clicked shut, Cody turned back to Jimena. “Still pretending?”

Her eyes fluttered open. She gave him a sheepish smile.

He didn't press. "Hungry?"

She nodded.

He returned with hot porridge and fried dough sticks—two of each.

"I'm starving too," he said, sitting beside her. "Let's eat."

They ate in companionable silence. For the first time in a long while, she felt safe.

After a few days, Jimena was discharged. She checked on Cataleya and the others—reunited with their families, finally home. The village traffickers were behind bars.

"I want to make this public," Jimena told Cody. "People ignore trafficking. But it's everywhere. If we talk about it, maybe we can stop it."

"I agree. Got someone in mind?"

"A PR contact. But she works with Miranda's company... and Miranda's ignoring me. Do you have her number?"

Cody raised a brow. "No, but I can get it."

The next day, Jimena called Miranda. The call was cut immediately.

Frustrated, she went to the company's office. The receptionist pointed her to someone in charge.

"Ms. MacLean," the woman said with a polite smile, "Ms. Gaudet would like to meet with you in person."

Chapter 1027

Jimena wasn't sure what game Miranda was playing, but she wasn't about to back down. This wasn't some trap—just a business meeting. Still, the receptionist's bright smile felt oddly performative. "Ms. Gaudet's waiting upstairs," she chirped, guiding Jimena to the elevator.

On the third floor, a secretary greeted her. "Ms. Gaudet's in a meeting. Please wait a moment."

Jimena's gut twisted. Seriously? First Miranda dodged her calls, and now this? Her voice sharpened. "I'm here to discuss a partnership with sincerity. If Ms. Gaudet isn't serious, just say so. I'm not here to be strung along."

The secretary flinched, flustered. “N-no, it’s not like that!”

Jimena crossed her arms. “Five minutes. If she’s not here, the deal’s off.”

She wasn’t going to grovel for a partnership. Professionalism was one thing—being disrespected was another. If Miranda wanted war, she’d get it.

Right on cue, Miranda swept in, heels tapping like gunfire on tile. “Got held up. Sorry, Ms. MacLean.” She extended a hand, her smile polite, her eyes ice-cold.

Jimena shook it, matching the energy. “Not a problem. I only have half an hour.” Her tone was smooth, her smile tighter than ever. “MacLean’s has been out of the loop on major deals—appreciate the reintroduction.”

Miranda’s jaw ticked slightly, but she led them into her office. It was sleek and minimalist—except for a photo frame on the desk. A man’s faint smile peeked out before Miranda subtly flipped the frame down. Her expression didn’t waver. “So. You’re here about the project?”

Jimena nodded, choosing not to comment on the photo. “We reviewed the Huaning Building terms. Two sticking points: First, your projected margin is under ten percent—too low for top-tier materials. Second, your clause dictating our hiring decisions? Not happening. We make those calls.”

Miranda leaned back, unfazed. “That margin reflects the market. Clients call the shots, Ms. MacLean. If your company can’t follow through, that’s a breach. We’ll double the deposit—can MacLean’s afford that?”

Jimena’s patience snapped. She had no beef with Miranda personally—until now. “If you’ve got a problem with me, come at me directly. Don’t hide behind a contract.”

The meeting ended in deadlock. Miranda refused to budge. MacLean’s couldn’t afford to breach without risking collapse. And the pressure from shareholders? Relentless.

Sleepless nights and endless headaches wore Jimena down. The dark circles under her eyes were starting to match her mood. Her father, Mr. MacLean, finally pulled her aside.

“Don’t burn yourself out over this, kid,” he said gently. “If it’s too much, I’ll take over.”

Jimena shook her head. “I’ve got it, Dad. Just need a breather.”

He didn’t push—but he made a call to Cody.

The next day, Cody summoned her to the hospital for a “follow-up.” She was confused—she felt fine—but showed up anyway.

“It’s not a checkup,” Cody admitted. “Your dad told me what’s going on. You’re not sleeping. Barely eating. What’s happening, Jimena?”

His tone was calm, but there was a quiet force in his gaze that made her squirm. She looked away, unable to lie.

Chapter 1028

Jimena lowered her eyes. "It's nothing."

Cody sighed. "Still keeping secrets from me?"

She fumbled for a response, but he didn't press. Instead, he gestured to a seat. "Sit. Eat."

She hadn't had a real meal all day—hadn't most days. One meal, maybe two, if she remembered. The shareholder mess had consumed her.

Cody laid out two trays from the hospital cafeteria—simple, but balanced. "I'm eating too," he said, sitting across from her.

Jimena dug in. The warmth of the food grounded her more than she expected.

"Rough patch?" Cody asked softly.

"A bit," she murmured—then immediately regretted letting her guard down.

Before he could ask more, a nurse knocked. "Doctor, surgery prep."

"Coming," Cody said, then turned to Jimena. He pulled on his white coat. "I've got to go. You staying or heading back?"

"I'll go. Thanks... for this."

Back at the office, Jimena hit her limit.

At the next board meeting, she stood tall. "If anyone here feels like they can run this company better, take the floor. Volunteers?"

Crickets.

She shut her laptop. "Meeting's over."

Afterward, her assistant walked in. "Ms. MacLean, update from Gaudet Group."

Jimena braced herself.

But the assistant grinned. "They've changed their terms. Full autonomy on the MacLean side. No strings. Ms. Gaudet wants to meet today."

Jimena blinked. "She said that?"

“Word-for-word.”

Alone, Jimena processed it. What changed?

She got her answer later.

Miranda sat in her office, still reeling from a call that morning. When she'd heard Cody was on the line, her heart had leapt. Maybe he still cared.

Then he spoke. *“Stop making things difficult for her.”*

Her heart sank.

“You ignored me for years, and now you call—for her?” she spat.

“You’ve gone too far,” Cody said calmly. “I’m not Ronan. I don’t do these games. Focus on him.”

“Ronan’s got a kid. He doesn’t want me.”

“I don’t either.”

The bluntness gutted her. Cody had never spoken to her like that.

He added, “You never really wanted me. Don’t punish her because of that.”

After he hung up, Miranda stared at the photo on her desk—Cody, smiling and young. A chapter closed.

That afternoon, she met Jimena at a café. The air between them had lost its venom.

Miranda stirred her coffee, then asked quietly, “Did Cody ever talk about me?”

Jimena blinked. “Barely.”

Miranda gave a bitter chuckle. “Figures. I looked down on him back then. Regretted it later. But... it never really began.”

She stood, then paused. “Take care of him. He loves you.”

And just like that, she walked out.

Jimena sat frozen. The hostility, the sabotage—it all made sense now. Cody had intervened. For her.

That evening, she picked Cody up from the hospital. He emerged from the OR in bloodstained scrubs, frowning. “Stay back—I need to change.”

She waited patiently. Five minutes later, he reappeared—clean, composed.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked, surprised.

Jimena met his eyes, voice clear and unguarded. “I missed you.”

Cody froze.

They’d never said *love*, but the space between them hummed with it—loud, unspoken, and undeniable.

Chapter 1029

The door slammed shut, and Jimena and Cody stumbled from the entryway to the couch, lips locked in a hungry kiss.

As they tumbled onto the cushions, Cody cupped the back of Jimena’s head, shielding her from the sharp coffee table edge. Their breaths mingled, the sound of their panting echoing like a racing heartbeat.

“Wait,” Jimena gasped, pulling back.

Cody didn’t want to stop, but she nudged him firmly. “Go downstairs and grab some... you know.”

Her cheeks flushed. He caught her drift.

A teasing spark lit up his eyes. “Nah, I’m good.” He leaned in, brushing her earlobe with his teeth, breath warm and shaky. Lust dulled his reason.

Once a guy gets a taste, it’s hard to pull away.

But Jimena held her ground. “I’m serious. Go.”

With a reluctant groan, Cody stood, pecked her lips, and grabbed his jacket. “Fine. Don’t move.”

The convenience store outside the complex wasn’t far. Cody moved fast, returning in record time, pink box in hand.

Their brief separation didn’t cool anything off.

They tangled together again, heat surging. Cody pulled her close from behind, voice rough. “Help me open it.”

Jimena’s ears burned. “Do it yourself.”

“Come on, babe.”

She gave in, fingers trembling as she peeled back the crinkling plastic. The silence between them crackled louder than any sound.

Cody swept her into his arms, and she melted into the rhythm of his touch. Her body answered him instinctively, responding in unfamiliar, overwhelming ways.

Afterward, he grazed her collarbone with his teeth, voice husky. “What’s got you so into it tonight?”

“If you didn’t like it, we could skip next time,” she said, teasing.

“Oh, I loved it.” He tilted her face toward his and kissed her slow. “Let’s keep going.”

From then on, they slipped into a rhythm—unspoken, undefined.

Jimena still kept her own place but spent most nights at Cody’s. Her toner, lipstick, toothbrush slowly took over his apartment. The signs were there—any visitor could see something serious was brewing.

But neither of them brought it up.

Sometimes Jimena liked the hazy vibe between them. Other times, it made her itch. What was going on in Cody’s head?

“Should I dig into his past?” she muttered one night.

“You sure?” Noor said. “What if you find something you can’t handle?”

Jimena went quiet. It was like being blindfolded, handed a slice of cake. You don’t know if it’s sweet or poison until it’s too late.

Then she noticed Noor zoning out. “Hey. You okay?”

Noor blinked. “Just spaced.”

“Something up with Esteban?” Jimena asked gently.

“It’s nothing,” Noor said, forcing a smile. She didn’t want to go there.

Jimena didn’t push. Every relationship came with its own mess. No one could clean it up for you.

“If you need me, I’m here.”

Noor laughed, nudging her. “I know, big-shot President MacLean.”

They headed to the mall, chatting, killing time. Until chaos hit.

“Stop that guy! He’s robbing someone!” a voice screamed.

A man came barreling toward them. Jimena dodged, but Noor wasn’t quick enough. He grabbed her, pressing a fruit knife to her neck.

“Don’t move!” he shouted.

Jimena’s heart pounded. She reached for her phone, but he barked, “No cops, or she dies!”

“Okay, okay.” Jimena dropped the phone and raised her hands. “Stay calm. You don’t want a murder charge, right?”

The guy hesitated, grip still tight. Guards appeared, surrounding the scene. Bystanders backed off. The first floor emptied in eerie silence.

On the second floor, Esteban stood frozen. Then he saw her—Noor—and his blood ran cold.

“Noor!” he shouted, bolting down the escalator. His entourage struggled to keep up.

Noor trembled, blade inches from her skin. *Please, someone save me. I don’t want to die.*

Then, a blur. The knife was kicked from the man’s hand, and Noor was yanked to safety.

Gasps rose from the crowd. Noor, dizzy, looked up into a familiar face.

“Esteban?” she whispered.

Before he could speak, she groaned and shoved him away.

Jimena pushed through the crowd, shouting, “Call 911!”

The attacker had a second knife—hidden. Noor had been stabbed in the side. Her skin was pale, her lips trembling.

Esteban’s face twisted in rage. The man was already restrained, but Esteban lunged, fists flying. It took bystanders to drag him off.

The ambulance came. Jimena helped Noor inside, Esteban trailing silently behind.

At the hospital, the news was bad—organ damage. Cody, now in scrubs, looked grim but calm.

“She’ll be okay,” he told Jimena before heading into surgery.

The OR light stayed on for over an hour.

Jimena and Esteban waited in silence outside, tension thick between them, but worry for Noor kept them both still.

Chapter 1030

When the doctor emerged, Jimena rushed forward. "How's my friend?"

He pulled off his mask. "Her liver was punctured—internal bleeding. But the surgery went well. She's stable. She just needs rest."

Jimena exhaled. Relief hit like a wave.

Esteban, standing nearby, still looked like stone—but he finally relaxed, just a little.

Noor was still under anesthesia. Jimena peeked in at her, then stepped back.

Esteban was on the phone, barking orders. "No settlements. Get a lawyer. Charge him with attempted murder."

His assistant hesitated. "Attempted murder might be hard to—"

"A stretch?" Esteban's voice sharpened. "She's lucky to be alive!"

Jimena shifted and accidentally made a sound. Esteban turned, stiff at first—then softened slightly when he saw her.

But he didn't say anything.

"Mr. Harper," she began.

His assistant vanished. "What?"

"She got hurt because of you. Aren't you going to check on her?" Her voice shook. She'd heard whispers of their past. She already thought he was cold. This just confirmed it.

Noor had taken a knife for him. And he couldn't even go inside?

Esteban looked toward the ward, frowning—but said nothing.

Jimena gave a bitter laugh. "Fine. Remember this, Mr. Harper. If you're not going now, don't bother later. Stay away from her."

She turned before he could respond. Esteban didn't try to stop her. He let her go, no explanations.

Jimena's anger didn't ease until he was out of sight.

Later that night, Cody found her still at the hospital. "Why are you still here?" he asked softly.

"I didn't want her waking up alone," Jimena said. "Besides... you're here too."

He looked at her with quiet affection. "She'll sleep through the night. You won't help her by running yourself ragged. Come home."

She nodded.

At Cody's place, the warmth of his apartment hit her. The tension finally caught up. She could barely keep her eyes open.

Cody chuckled. "You're wiped. I'll grab you some water."

While he showered, Jimena crawled into pajamas and skimmed through work files on the bed. Half-asleep, she noticed his phone light up.

Stranger: *Free to meet? I've got something for you.*

The message felt too casual. Too familiar. *Stranger?* Her gut twisted.

Cody stepped out, towel draped around his shoulders, hair damp. "What's up?"

"Just work," she lied with a tight smile.

"Don't overdo it," he warned. "It's late."

She nodded, brushing it off—but her curiosity grew.

Later that night, while Cody slept, she crept toward his phone, fingertips brushing the cold glass.

Suddenly, his arm slipped around her waist.

"Can't sleep, or you up to something?" he murmured, voice low and sleepy.

Jimena froze. Then slipped back under the covers. "Just work tomorrow. Not tonight."

He kissed her forehead. "Sleep, then. But no promises if you keep squirming."

She closed her eyes, but her mind wouldn't stop spinning.

The next morning, she hid her dark circles under concealer. No one at work noticed.

"Ms. MacLean, document for your review," an assistant said.

"Leave it there." Then she paused. "Any updates from Gaudet's company?"

“No, ma’am.”

She nodded, letting the assistant go. But doubt festered. *Miranda swore she was done with Cody. So why does it feel like she isn't?*

That afternoon, Cody called. “Won’t be home tonight. Got a packed surgery schedule. Eat out or cook, okay?”

“What’s keeping you?”

“Too many surgeries. Just giving you a heads-up.”

They usually made time for dinner. This stung.

“Alright. Don’t work too late.”

After hanging up, something itched in her chest. She called the hospital.

“Does Dr. Cody have any surgeries this afternoon?”

“Dr. Cody’s on leave this afternoon,” the receptionist said. “Try tomorrow.”

The line went dead.

Jimena stood frozen, phone in hand.

Cody never lied to her.

So why now?

She stared at his name on her screen, finger hovering over the call button.

But she didn’t press it.